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LARKIN'S DESCRIPTION OF CALIFORNIA

BY ROBERT G. CLELAND, PH. D.

The collection of Larkin papers from which the following extracts were taken is preserved in the Bancroft Library of the University of California. There are several thousand manuscripts of different lengths and varying degrees of importance. Altogether they constitute the most valuable source of California history, just prior to the American occupation, now extant. While H. H. Bancroft refers to many of these documents and makes extensive use of some, there is much virgin material in the collection awaiting the historical student and the light of publication.

Larkin's "Description of California," an official document, was written for the special benefit of President Polk and addressed to the Secretary of State, James Buchanan. Parts of it were confidential, but other portions were undoubtedly designed for newspaper publication. Larkin's intimate knowledge of California affairs makes this account both interesting and authoritative. In the original it consisted of seven parts as follows:

1. General account of the province.
2. Political state of the country, 1845 and 1846.
3. Commerce.
4. Notes on personal character (a brief account of individual inhabitants and their attitude toward the United States.)
5. Maritime statistics.
6. Governmental, military and miscellaneous affairs (chiefly statistics).
7. A map of the coast—"for the Secretary's use, showing the roads in the interior from one mission to another, and when occasion may demand it, to point out any particular part of this country by land or sea."

All of the divisions here mentioned, except the seventh, are to be found in the collection. Except for some changes in punctuation and minor grammatical constructions, I have made no alteration of the original.

GENERAL ACCOUNT

Upper California is situated between the 32nd and 42nd degrees of North Latitude, and the part which borders on the Pacific is between the 117th and 123rd degrees of West Longitude: its boundaries on the east have been considered the Rocky Mountains, although the part that has hitherto been settled is a very narrow

strip of land on the shores of the Pacific not exceeding twenty leagues in width.

The first mission settled was San Diego (in) the Southwest of Upper California, which took place in 1769; San Carlos de Monterey was settled one or two years afterwards, and gradually the rest, amounting in all to twenty-one: the last, San Francisco Solano, was established in 1822. Some of these missions were built much larger than others, yet they were nearly all upon the same plan, viz: the principal side of a large square was occupied by the Church, a suite (sic) of apartments for the habitation of the Priests, apartments for travellers, and a guard house; the other three sides of the square consisted of granaries, work shops of all kinds (carpenters, weavers, blacksmiths, etc., etc.), cellars, wine presses, separate apartments for the Indian boys and girls, etc.; and a short distance from them were the habitations of the Indians: in each mission there was a large garden and orchard, and in those capable of producing grapes, extensive vineyards. Besides the missions there were four Presidios, (towns) San Francisco, Monterey, San Diego, Santa Barbara; two villages, the Pueblo de Los Angeles, and the Pueblo de San José; likewise a hamlet called Villa de Bonaficia (?). The garrison of each Presidio was composed of about eighty cavalry, with a very few infantry and artillery. The commandante of each Presidio was the captain of the respective company of cavalry and formerly decided all disputes, for before the year 1822 there were no Alcaldes or any other civil authorities.¹ The residence of the Governor (who up to 1822 was generally a captain or a colonel sent from Mexico), was in Monterey. Formerly all the land in the country belonged to the different missions, for although they were situated at an average distance of about fourteen leagues from each other, their respective boundaries always joined. In the year 1825 the missions might be considered at the height of their prosperity. At that time they counted from 2000 to 3000 Indians each, and from 6000 to 100,000 head of black cattle, an equal number of sheep, and such immense herds of horses that large numbers were killed in order to avoid the destruction of pasturage. Before the year 1822 the only trade of the Missions was with vessels from San Blas and Callao to purchase tallow.² In the year 1822 an English house, established in Lima through their agent (W. E. Hartnell of Monterey), made a contract with the greater part of the Missions to receive all the hides at \$1 apiece, tallow and grease at 3 \$ an aroba (of 25 pounds) that they could produce. In the same year an American ship arrived from Boston and prepared the way for the future trade which, since that day, has been carried on almost exclusively by the

1. Literally this was incorrect, but for all practical purposes Larkin's statement holds good.

2. Larkin does not take into account the illicit trade frequently carried on by the mission authorities with the fur traders before this date.

New Englanders.³ The present export (1846) amounts to about 80,000 hides, 60,000 arobas of tallow, 10,000 fanagas of wheat, 1,000,000 feet of lumber, some staves and shingles, 10,000 \$ of soap, 20,000 \$ of beaver, land and sea otter skins, 1000 barrels Aguardiente and wine, 200 ounces of gold worth 17 \$ an ounce.⁴ The missions now are almost entirely destroyed; some that had formerly from 2000 to 3000 Indians have now not above 100; others none; but few missions have any cattle. About the year 1835 a law was made to take away the management of the temporalities of the missions from the Priests and give it to the secular administration, who in a very short time managed to completely ruin the establishment without in general benefitting themselves, even taking the tile off the roofs of the houses. The land has in great degree been divided out among private individuals. Although the Mission cattle have disappeared, there are as many if not more hides shipped from California at this period as there were (sic) when the missions were in their prosperity, arising from the increase on private farms.

Exclusive of countless wild Indians and some neophytes, California has perhaps some fifteen thousand inhabitants, descendants of Spanish and Mexican fathers, mostly from native mothers. The baptized Indians, now released by the demolishing of the Missions, are engaged by the Inhabitants as servants, while many of the Inhabitants are hired by each other to do the more superior work of the farms. The Indians who were taught by the Spanish Padres the different mechanical arts are now dead and no more of their tribe will ever take their place.⁵ Foreigners are now doing all the work of this class in California. The farms now occupied are owned by Mexicans, Californians, naturalized foreigners, who became so by signing a simple memorial (some even by proxy), stating that such was their wish, when a letter of citizenship was immediately filled up for the Petitioner without any form, oath, or ceremony on his part. The farms are given to any petitioner (who is a citizen) from one to eleven square leagues as he may ask for it with little or no expense.

The land joining the sea coast is principally taken up, also that immediately on the Bay of San Francisco, and a few on the River Sacramento, but more on the San Joaquin River. Taking the whole extent of the country but a small portion is divided into ranches having owners. A part of the Mission lands still belongs to Government and all other unclaimed lands. Some few farms are being vacated by the Californians from fear of further depredations of the wild Indians, who yearly steal thousands of horses even out of

3. For the best account of this trade yet published, see Theodore Gray, *The Hide and Tallow Trade in Alta California*, *The Grizzly Bear*, July, 1917.

4. The export of \$3400 of gold in 1846 is an item of more than passing interest. Most of this doubtless came from San Fernando.

5. This loss of skilled artisans was one of the important minor evils that followed the secularization of the missions.

the enclosed yards near their dwelling houses. They are now (almost every week) committing depredations of this kind. The whites but seldom follow them to regain their property. The Indians are losing all fear of the inhabitants and with their arrows have shot several of them during the years 1845 and 1846.

There are from one thousand to twelve hundred foreigners (including their families) in California, a majority of them residing around the Bay of San Francisco and on the Sacramento River, and one-third of the men are citizens of this country.

Many of them never expect to speak the prevailing language of the country, so that at this early period a knowledge of the English language is to a merchant of more importance than the Spanish. In 1832 there were in the whole department some two or three hundred foreigners; there are now some eight or ten who have resided here twenty-five years. They were sailors, now farmers, entrapped from their vessels by the former Spanish government.⁶

The first arrival of American settlers on the Sacramento River has been since 1840. Three-fourths of the full number of foreigners in this country are Americans. Of the remaining fourth the subjects of Great Britain predominate. Of this fourth the majority are in expectation of being under the Government of the U. States. Probably all are willing in preference to remaining as they are now. For the last five years the largest proportion of the emigrants have arrived at New Helvetia (Capt. Sutter's establishment),⁷ excepting a few of them from Oregon. They leave Independence, Missouri, which is the starting point, every April or May, arriving at the Pacific in September or October. Soon after their arrival at New Helvetia they scatter over the River Sacramento and the Bay of San Francisco, asking for farms from the Government or settling on private grants by the owner's consent. Some have arrived at the Pueblo de Los Angeles (town of the Angels), near San Pedro, via "Santa Fee," some of whom had married at the latter place. A few arrived by water from Valparaiso, Callao, and the Sandwich Islands. A person travelling from San Diego to San Francisco, or Bodega, can stop at a foreigner's farm house almost every few hours and travel without any knowledge of the Spanish language.

Among the emigrants from Independence there are several German families who have resided in the U. States (farmers, mechanics, laborers), others are young men from the New England or Middle States who left home seeking a fortune in the Western States, thence here. The emigration in 1845 amounted to from four to five hundred; from U. States newspaper reports of 1845 from one to two thousand are expected to arrive this August to October.

6. Probably Larkin knew what he meant by the word, "entrapped." I do not.

7. Established in 1839. The objective of most overland emigrant parties from 1842 to 1846.

Emigrants leaving Independence for the Pacific should furnish themselves (if a family of five or six persons) with one good wagon, four or five yoke of oxen, three or four cows, three horses, and to each grown person 250 lbs. of flour, 150 lbs. of bacon, 30 lbs. of coffee, 50 lbs. sugar, 20 lbs. of rice, two good blankets, and a few cooking utensils. Every male person over fourteen years of age should have one good rifle, 10 pounds of powder, 30 pounds lead, 2000 percussion caps and a good horse. On arriving on the banks of the Sacramento and finding a convenient piece of land that the emigrant can occupy, he should begin sowing wheat from December to February; Beans, peas and corn in April or May, and should also procure for himself cows two years old, worth from 4 \$ to 5 \$; young bulls at 2 \$ or 3 \$; thirty or forty mares at 5 or 6 \$; a stallion at 15 \$ or 20 \$; and a few sheep at 2 \$ each. One hundred young cows will produce from seventy to ninety calves between the second and twelfth months; from one thousand to fifteen hundred dollars in cash will start an enterprising man in breeding animals for a California farm.⁸

In a few years the settler may find purchasers for produce from among the emigrants and throughout the country. In time he will find a market in the Sandwich Islands, North West Coast, San Blas, Mazatlan, and elsewhere. Wheat produces from forty to fifty fold under the most imperfect cultivation. The Spanish Padres for many years obtained one hundred fold at some of the missions. One hundred and eighty fold was once gathered at the mission of San José. Wild oats and mustard cover the country, the former from three to four feet high, the latter so high and compact that it is almost impossible for a traveller to find his horses when they stray among it. Rye and Buckwheat have not been proved. Hemp was raised by the former Padres. Cotton has been proved to advantage, but no quantity has been planted. Every kind of vegetable yet planted has produced well. Apples, pears, quinces and peaches are common all over California. In parts of the country there are limes, oranges, almonds, figs and walnuts. Plums and cherries have not been introduced. Grapes of the very best quality in the greatest abundance in different sections of the country. Latitude south of 34 degrees produces the best. With imperfect means good wine could be produced and distilled. The climate of California is surpassed by no other. The lowest rate of the thermometer in the shade at Monterey in 1845 was 44 degrees, the highest 86 degrees; from 60 to 70 is the common rate throughout the year.

The account then took up the Political State of California. Larkin's treatment is exceedingly interesting, but too long for presentation at this time.

8. Larkin's statement of the equipment necessary for the overland journey and of the cost of livestock in California in 1845 are the best I have yet found.